Statement of

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Sierra Nevada Forest Plan: Protecting Communities, Water, Wildlife and Forests in the Sierra Nevada

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I am Jack Blackwell, Regional Forester, Pacific Southwest Region of the Forest Service in California. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to talk with you about the serious forest health problem we face in the national forests of the Sierra Nevada, the wildfire threat to homes and communities in California, and actions the Region is taking, especially my recent Sierra Nevada Framework decision. I believe this decision is an excellent start in helping protect homes, communities, and important resources such as old growth and wildlife habitat.

I would like to thank the Chairman for his and the committee's work in passing the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-148). It, in combination with other tools the Healthy Forest Initiative provides, will help us get work done on the ground faster and more efficiently.

The Forest Health Problem in the Sierra Nevada

I am deeply concerned about the forests of the Sierra Nevada. Over a hundred years of active fire suppression and other factors have left them overgrown and out of balance with natural conditions. Fire is a natural part of the Sierra Nevada ecosystem and forests that miss too many natural fire cycles, either through expanded use of wildland fire use or prescribed burning, change character and become denser. The most serious of these conditions is called condition class three. These are areas at the greatest risk of the loss of key ecosystem components because of the long period of time that natural fire has not operated as a process in them. Forty percent of the 11.5 million acres of national forest land in the Sierra Nevada is in condition class three. Another thirty percent is in condition class 2, which is less serious than condition class three, but still considered ecologically unbalanced. In total there are over eight million acres in the Sierra Nevada that depart from historical ranges of fire frequency, vegetation structure, and fuel composition in the Sierra Nevada that are in need of ecological restoration.

In addition to this forest health condition, I am concerned that we are gradually losing our wood products infrastructure – the mills and operators that help get the work done. These continued losses constrain our options for treating areas efficiently to restore forest health.

The Wildfire Threat to Homes and Communities

The San Bernardino Mountains of southern California showed us what can happen when unhealthy forests, drought, and insect infestations converge. Unnaturally dense forests and extreme drought led to an explosion of bark beetle populations and unprecedented tree losses. However the beetle infestation is a symptom though of the problem. The cause is excessive tree densities in the forest. When the October fires moved into the stands of dead and dying trees in the mountains of Lake Arrowhead, they burned with incredible ferocity, destroying over 300 homes. Only the heroic efforts of the firefighters kept the disaster from being much, much worse.

I am extremely concerned that the widespread forest mortality that occurred in the forests of southern California could easily happen in the Sierra Nevada. I am especially fearful for the many communities in or around national forests. I personally witnessed the suffering and devastation the southern California fires caused. I am determined to do everything I can to see it is not repeated in the Sierra Nevada. But the Federal government cannot do it all alone. Decisive action must be taken on the parts of governments, communities, private landowners and individual homeowners.

Actions Taken to Address Forest Health

I believe we have made an excellent start with my recent decision on the new Sierra Nevada plan and our new campaign, "Forests With a Future", to address the forest health issues in California. The 2004 Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (2004 plan) builds on those plans that have been developed previously. It keeps the goals, strategy, and land allocations of the 2001 Sierra Nevada Framework decision, but corrects the fatal flaw of the original plan – the complex and overlapping set of guidelines that were a barrier to successful implementation. The changes the 2004 plan makes are critical to achieving the plan's essential fuel reduction goals. Managers now have the flexibility to implement an integrated vegetative management strategy that is aggressive enough to reduce risks to communities and modify fire behavior over the broader landscape. The decision will increase the number of old forests and protect wildlife habitat while at the same time allowing more wood by-products to be generated by fuel reduction projects, which, in some cases will help offset the cost of needed treatments.

The 2004 plan will also allow the fullest possible implementation of the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group (HFQLG) pilot project. Given the changes in the 2004 plan, we now estimate that in the six remaining years of the pilot project, 174,600 acres of defensible fuel profile zones will be treated, 1.1 billion board feet of timber will be produced, and 766,800

cubic feet of biomass will be generated. We are on track to implement the 1998 legislation as originally envisioned.

The 2004 plan is the centerpiece of the Region's Forests With a Future campaign. The campaign is a set of strategic actions to reduce damage from wildfire, and protect old forests, wildlife and local communities. It is designed to produce positive and reliable results. The campaign strongly urges individuals to take actions that will help protect their homes from wildfire, and to work with the Forest Service and local organizations such as Fire Safe Councils to plan strategies and actions that will help protect communities. These local partnerships are essential to provide the full measure of protection to communities.

It will take time to achieve our goals as outlined in the 2004 plan. Over the long term, we will see significant benefits. Within 20 years, thinning projects will be implemented on 700,000 acres around Sierra Nevada communities to help protect them from wildfire. Over the next fifty years, we expect a 30 percent drop in acres burned by unnaturally intense wildfires. The acreage of old forests is projected to double and spotted owl habitat nearly double. At the same time the forests will be producing wood products that provide jobs and income to local communities.

In the short term, during 2004, we intend to:

- Reduce fuels across 82,000 acres of national forest lands, with more than half of that work being completed around local communities.
- Remove more than two million tons of biomass that poses a potential fire hazard.
- Work with Fire Safe Councils and others in some of the 800 local communities in the Sierras.

Working With the State of California and Other Partners is Essential

We are working successfully with an array of partners at the regional and local levels to implement projects on the ground to improve forest conditions. The Forest Service has increased an emphasis on partnerships and collaboration as we work to address our forest health

problem. The state of California is a vital partner in this effort. We have worked closely with the state in our fire suppression efforts over the years, and have expanded that relationship through the California Fire Alliance. We are cooperating closely with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection in collecting and analyzing landscape level fire and fuels data. The Region also plans to work with the State Historical Preservation Office to develop more programmatic agreements for prescribed fire similar to the one developed for the Sierra Nevada national forests. I am looking forward to continuing these kinds of close working relationships as we work to improve forest health and protect communities.

We will also step up the cooperative work we are doing with other agencies, local communities and organizations, counties, and private landowners. Fire Safe Councils in particular provide a valued connection to local communities. At least fifty percent of the Region's fuels reduction work will be conducted in the Wildland-Urban Interface. Those treatments are most effective when linked to work completed by other agencies, the state, and private landowners; and with actions by homeowners to protect their homes and communities. To provide optimal wildfire risk mitigation across the landscape, we are prioritizing our hazardous fuels reduction work to ensure the most beneficial use of funds.

A good example of a valuable partnership is the Southwest Interface Team project (SWIFT) about fifty miles south of Jackson, CA. The Groveland Ranger District of the Stanislaus National Forest is a member of SWIFT, which includes members from three counties, a state agency, and three federal agencies. SWIFT has developed and is implementing a cooperative strategy to reduce wildfire risk on 132,000 acres of federal, private and county lands, an area that includes six communities. Forest Service projects are coordinated with the SWIFT strategy, and the local Resource Advisory Council (RAC) is helping support this work through RAC funded projects. SWIFT is also working closely with a local Fire Safe Council. It is this kind of locally based, cooperative and integrated effort that will be most successful at reducing damage from wildfires and restoring forest health.

The Continued Need for Strong Science

Although the campaign and the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment are grounded in the best available scientific information, we will continue to have gaps in our knowledge. We need to know more of how these complex ecosystems work and how management actions play out over time. The Forest Service intends to continue to make steady progress in closing these knowledge gaps. The stronger the science we have available to us as land managers, the better decisions we can make to manage and protect the land. For instance, we need to plan fuels treatments across the Sierra Nevada in such a way that maximizes the fuel treatment benefits for each acre treated. The science for that need is incomplete. We must learn more about fuel reduction strategies and better understand their effects if we are to slow wildfires and protect wildlife, human lives, and property.

The Pacific Southwest Research Station, whose new Director Jim Sedell is with me today, provided invaluable help in developing the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment. We are committed to continuing that partnership as we work to fill information gaps and address some of the management uncertainties that we struggle with in managing public lands. We firmly believe the scientific community can help find the answers we need.

We are also committed in the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment to active adaptive management and monitoring as a way to gather information and increase our understanding as we implement this improved plan. The plan will institutionalize adaptive management and monitoring, rather than adding other requirements onto existing obligations. Some commitments will be centralizing activity reporting using one database, developing an annual evaluation process to determine if desired conditions and management practices are resulting in expected outcomes, tracking bioregion-wide key attributes of fuels reduction projects to monitor achievement of the landscape-level desired conditions, and assessing the need for modifications to standards and guidelines at the forest and bioregion level based on changes observed at the project-level.

For adaptive management, we will continue to monitor the current program and develop new ones. Two examples of adaptive management programs are the scientific evaluation of management actions being incorporated into the HFQLG Pilot Project on the Lassen and Plumas National Forests and part of the Tahoe National Forest, and the study being done on the Sierra National Forest at Kings River. These studies will evaluate the effectiveness of fuels treatment actions on fire behavior, wildlife, and watershed protection. We will work with the scientists to ensure information from this study is given to managers in a timely manner and can be implemented on current HFQLG projects.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has informed me they have a strong desire to help develop a focused, science-based adaptive management strategy for the Sierra Nevada. I welcome their assistance, and intend to work with them, as well as with the State of California, and others, in developing these adaptive management approaches. I also hope to draw on the valuable expertise of the California university system as we move forward in implementing adaptive management on the ground.

Much Remains to be Done

I opened my remarks today by saying the Forests With a Future campaign and the 2004 Framework decision are a good start. They are, but in the long term they are only part of a solution, not the entire solution. Some have told me the decision does not go far enough. As the Regional Forester, I had to consider social and political factors as well as silvicultural ones in making my decision. Those led to the decision that I made in the 2004 final supplemental environmental impact statement.

About 3.5 billion board feet of timber would be removed in the first ten years of implementing the 2004 decision. That is only one-fifth of the expected growth of forests in the Sierra Nevada, and this disparity increases in the next three decades. In fifty years, the total inventory is expected to rise from the current level of 138 billion board feet to over 200 billion. We are considering the long-term implications of this trend and what actions may be necessary to address the issue of overgrowth.

We also must look beyond the Sierra Nevada. The October 2003 wildfires made us acutely aware of the forest health crisis in southern California. We face similar forest health problems in northwestern California, on national forests covered by the Northwest Forest Plan. A 2003 review of the Northwest Forest Plan in California found that we need to treat fuels more aggressively to meet ecosystem restoration goals of the Northwest Forest Plan and the National Fire Plan and better protect communities and resources. As a result, the Region is implementing an action plan to reduce fuels on the national forests in northwestern California as well.

Fire will always be a part of the forests of the Sierra Nevada. However, the extremely hot and intense fires that increasingly rage through overgrown forests are dramatic evidence of how unhealthy our forests have become. Such fires destroy old growth trees, wildlife habitat, damage watersheds, and wreck lives. It is clear to me that our public forests need to be aggressively managed to return them to healthy conditions, and it is my responsibility as a professional land manager to take action. In addition, other agencies, local communities and organizations, counties, and private landowners also have the responsibility to also take appropriate action. It will take years of concerted action to turn around this trend of catastrophic wildfire. We must begin this process now.

This concludes my statement. I would like to thank Chairman Pombo and the Subcommittee for the opportunity to talk with you today, and would be pleased to answer any questions that you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.